

## Nonmetro Population Growth Rebound of the 1990's Continues, But at a Slower Recent Rate

*Nonmetro population grew by about 6 percent from April 1990 to July 1996, with three-fifths of this increase derived from net inmovement of people from metro areas and from abroad. The pace of increase was somewhat lower than that in metro America (nearly 7 percent), but more than twice the increase that occurred during the entire 1980's. In the single year, 1995-96, nonmetro growth was below that of the previous several years.*

**T**he current trend of renewed growth in the nonmetro population has been rather well publicized by now, having been reported by major newspapers and magazines. This article updates the trend to mid-year 1996. The basic event we are following is one in which three-fourths of the country's 2,300 nonmetro counties have increased in population since 1990, after fewer than half had done so during the extended farm crisis and general rural economic recession of the 1980's.

From 1990 to 1996, nonmetro counties had an overall population increase of 5.9 percent, modestly below that of 6.9 percent in metro areas (table 1). In contrast, in the 1980's, metro areas grew at a rate four and a half times that of nonmetro communities.

### Migration From Metro Areas Provided Half of All Nonmetro Population Increase

The most significant feature of this turnabout is that half of the nonmetro growth since 1990 has stemmed directly from a net inflow of 1.5 million people from metro areas (fig. 1). Another 10 percent has come from direct foreign immigration. The metro areas had a somewhat faster increase, despite their migration losses to the nonmetro places, because of their much wider margin of natural increase—the surplus of births over deaths—and their disproportionate role as destinations for immigrants. It should be noted though, that the majority of metro areas received some net inflow from other parts of the United States. This was possible because metro outmovement from California and New York was so large that if just those two States were removed from the tabulations, the demographic balance sheet for the rest of the Nation would show some metro growth from domestic migration.

Table 1

### Regional population change, 1980-96

*All regions have had net migration of people into nonmetro areas since 1990*

Region	Population			Change		Net migration		Net migration rate	
	1996	1990	1980	1990-96	1980-90	1990-96	1980-90	1990-96	1980-90
	Thousands			Percent		Thousands		Percent	
United States:									
Nonmetro	53,904	50,903	49,577	5.9	2.7	1,827	-1,370	3.6	-2.8
Metro	211,380	197,816	176,965	6.9	11.8	3,629	6,576	1.8	3.7
Northeast:									
Nonmetro	5,397	5,267	5,018	2.5	5.0	33	45	0.6	0.9
Metro	46,183	45,543	44,119	1.4	3.2	-899	-657	-2.0	-1.5
Midwest:									
Nonmetro	16,524	15,978	16,310	3.4	-2.0	295	-1,047	1.8	-6.4
Metro	45,559	43,691	42,557	4.3	2.7	-89	-2,003	-0.2	-4.7
South:									
Nonmetro	23,694	22,359	21,733	6.0	2.9	849	-459	3.8	-2.1
Metro	69,404	63,095	53,634	10.0	17.6	3,172	4,672	5.0	8.7
West:									
Nonmetro	8,290	7,299	6,516	13.6	12.0	649	91	8.9	1.4
Metro	50,234	45,485	36,655	10.4	24.1	1,445	4,564	3.2	12.5

Note: See appendix for definitions of regions.

Source: Calculated by ERS using data from the Bureau of the Census.

For the most recent single year in which data are available, July 1, 1995 - July 1, 1996, the Census Bureau estimates a preliminary nonmetro population increase of 424,000. This is 23 percent below the upwardly revised estimate of 549,000 for the comparable 1994-95 interval, which is the highest of the post-1990 period. Improved metro employment growth may have contributed to the lower nonmetro increase of 1995-96. Whether this change foreshadows some further slackening of nonmetro growth remains to be seen. U.S. population growth as a whole eased in 1995-96, from diminished amounts of both natural increase and net immigration, and in residential terms, nonmetro areas are estimated to have accounted for all of the growth slowdown. Even so, the nonmetro growth of this most recent year continued to see net inmovement of people.

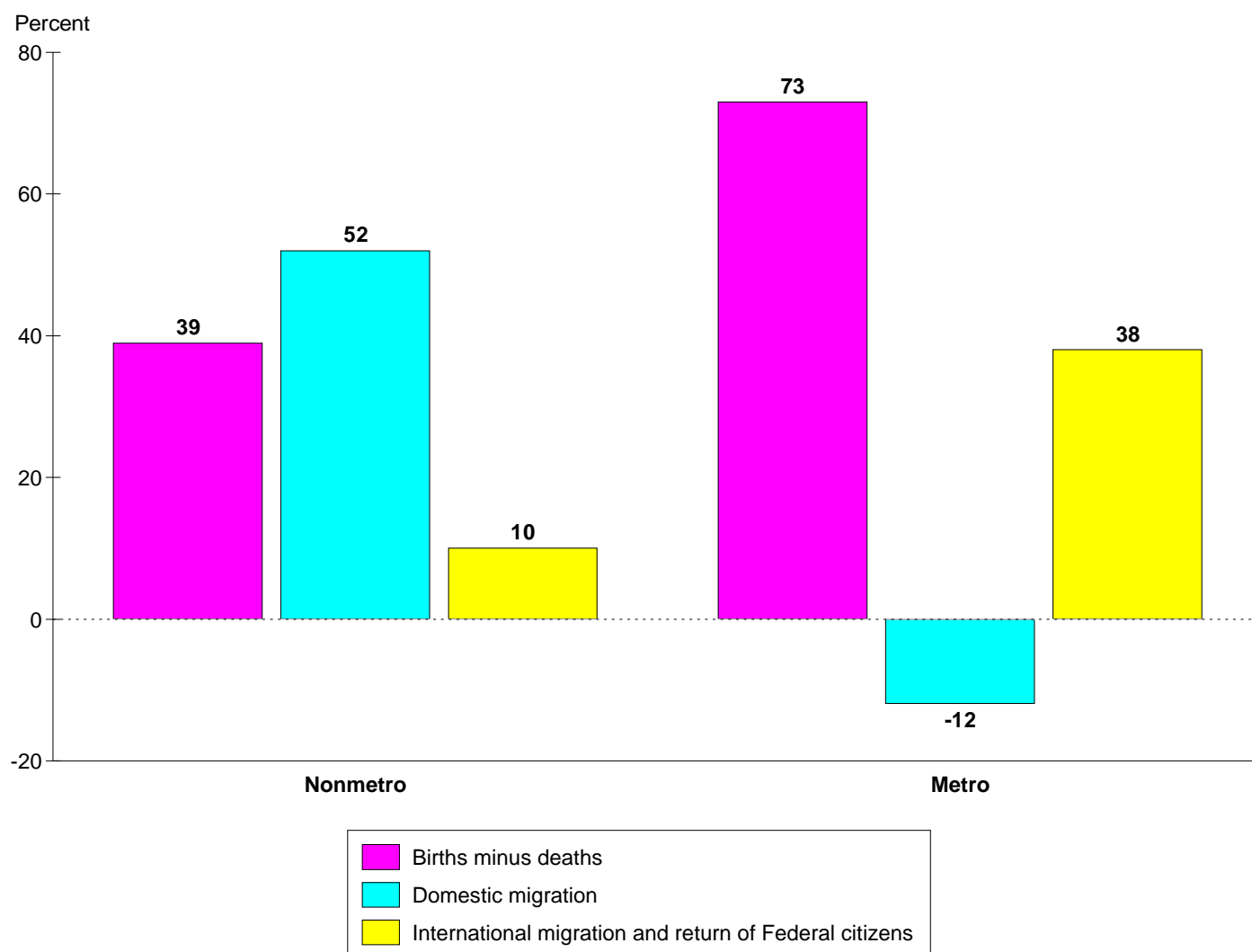
### Greater 1990's Retention or Growth of Population Found in All County Types

All broad economic types of nonmetro counties have shared in the rebound of population growth in the 1990's—manufacturing, farming, and mining areas, plus those dependent on government work, services and trade, or having unspecialized economies. But they

Figure 1

### Sources of population growth, 1990-96

*Nonmetro population increase has depended primarily on migration, while most metro growth has come from the surplus of births over deaths*



Source: Bureau of the Census.

have not done so equally. Among these mutually exclusive types, nonmetro counties with economies focused on services and trade had the most rapid average growth—8.4 percent, a pace faster than that in the typical metro area (app. tab. 9). A number of these counties attract retirees and/or are recreational destinations. Retirement-destination counties grew by 16.3 percent, the highest growth rate of any identified type of county. In such counties, nearly 90 percent of the population increase stems from net immigration. These counties are usually attractive to younger people as well, because of natural or developed amenities, and by far the majority of their growth is among persons under 65. Counties with high levels of recreational activity increased by 11.2 percent. The rapid growth of the retirement and recreation counties indicates noneconomic motivations that have propelled nonmetro population growth in many areas. The fact that per capita income is rising much slower in such places than elsewhere also suggests the role of nonpecuniary forces in shaping recent nonmetro trends. The counties with above average population growth rates have acquired about 80 percent of all nonmetro population gain.

The large block of nonmetro counties specializing in manufacturing had a population increase of 5.2 percent, a figure below the overall nonmetro value. However, these counties were less likely to lose population than were most other types, partly because their comparatively normal age composition made them the least likely to have more deaths than births. Growth in the 500-plus manufacturing counties, however, did not necessarily come from continued gains in manufacturing, for jobs in that segment of the national economy have not been increasing.

Farming- and mining-dependent counties had the lowest rates of overall population increase—4.0 and 2.8 percent, respectively. These traditional rural extractive industry sectors are still shedding workers, even where production is sustained. Half of all farming counties and nearly a third of mining areas fell in population, and where they grew, their growth frequently derived from other sources. Nevertheless, even these two county types generally participated in the larger demographic trend by having less loss than in the 1980's or some growth where there was earlier decline.

### **Regional Differences in Population Change Remain Strong**

The geography of population change reflects these growth patterns. As shown on the map (fig. 2), areas with above-average population increase are very common in the Mountain West. Much of this territory is still thinly settled, but new growth is rapid enough to be noticeable and the character of many places is changing as a result. Elsewhere, the Upper Great Lakes and Ozarks recreation/retirement districts continue to show above-average increases, as do the southern Blue Ridge Mountains counties, northern Florida, and many communities that adjoin thriving metro areas.

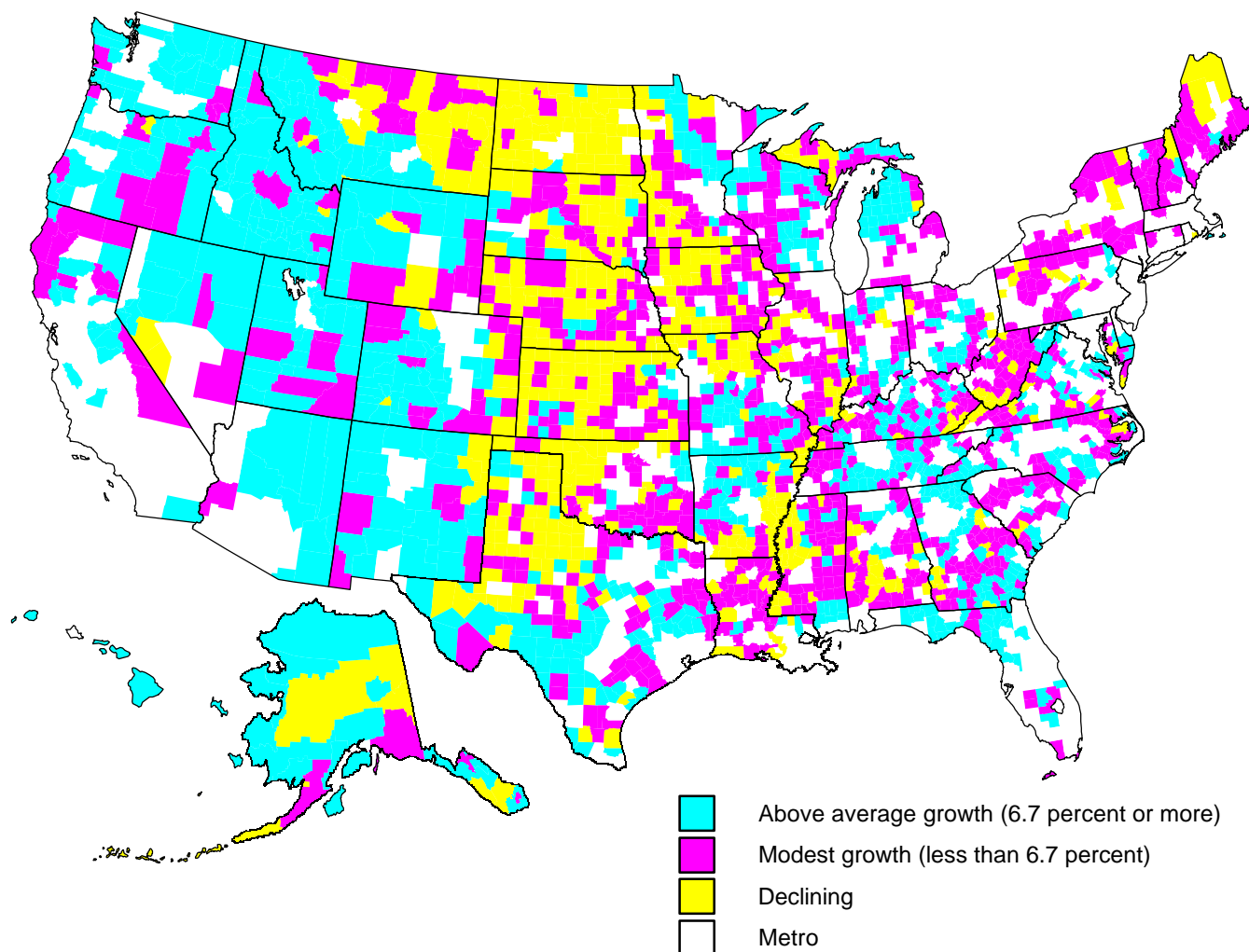
Areas that have declined in population since 1990 are most prevalent in the Great Plains and adjoining parts of the Corn Belt, where continued losses in farm employment have not yet been offset by other job growth. The only significant grouping of declining counties elsewhere is in the lower Mississippi Valley, especially in the Delta. Here, as in most of the Plains and Corn Belt farming areas, declines were typically modest and well below those of the 1980's. Remarkably, the Farm Belt has some counties that have declined in every census since 1900 and have continued to do so through 1996. This illustrates how very lengthy the adjustment process can be to continually falling labor requirements in agriculture, unless other sources of employment are developed.

The eastern half of the country is the most likely to have had population growth at low to average levels of less than 1 percent annually. Such counties often have major dependence on industrial work, even if there is also a farm base, and lack either the widespread amenity attraction of the West or the sparse settlement and farm and ranch dominance of so many of the declining places.

Figure 2

**Nonmetro population change, 1990-96**

*A third of all nonmetro counties grew faster than the Nation as a whole, but a fourth declined*



Note: National average growth for this period was 6.7 percent.

Source: Prepared by ERS using data from the Bureau of the Census.

### **More Than a Fourth of Nonmetro Counties Have Been Having More Deaths Than Births**

Over 600 nonmetro counties—more than a fourth of the total—had more deaths than births in the 1990-96 period. In some, the excess of deaths has developed because of extensive inmovement of older people in retirement who later die in the county. In the majority of cases, however, the smaller number of births stems from the aging of the population over several decades, as young adults moved away to opportunities elsewhere, and the smaller family size that most rural families have elected since the end of the Baby Boom. Age-specific birth rates in nonmetro America are not much above metro rates, or the number of children needed for ultimate population replacement. Half of the counties with natural decrease declined in total population, with the great majority of these also losing through net outmigration.

### **The Older Population Has Begun To Decline in Many Nonmetro Counties**

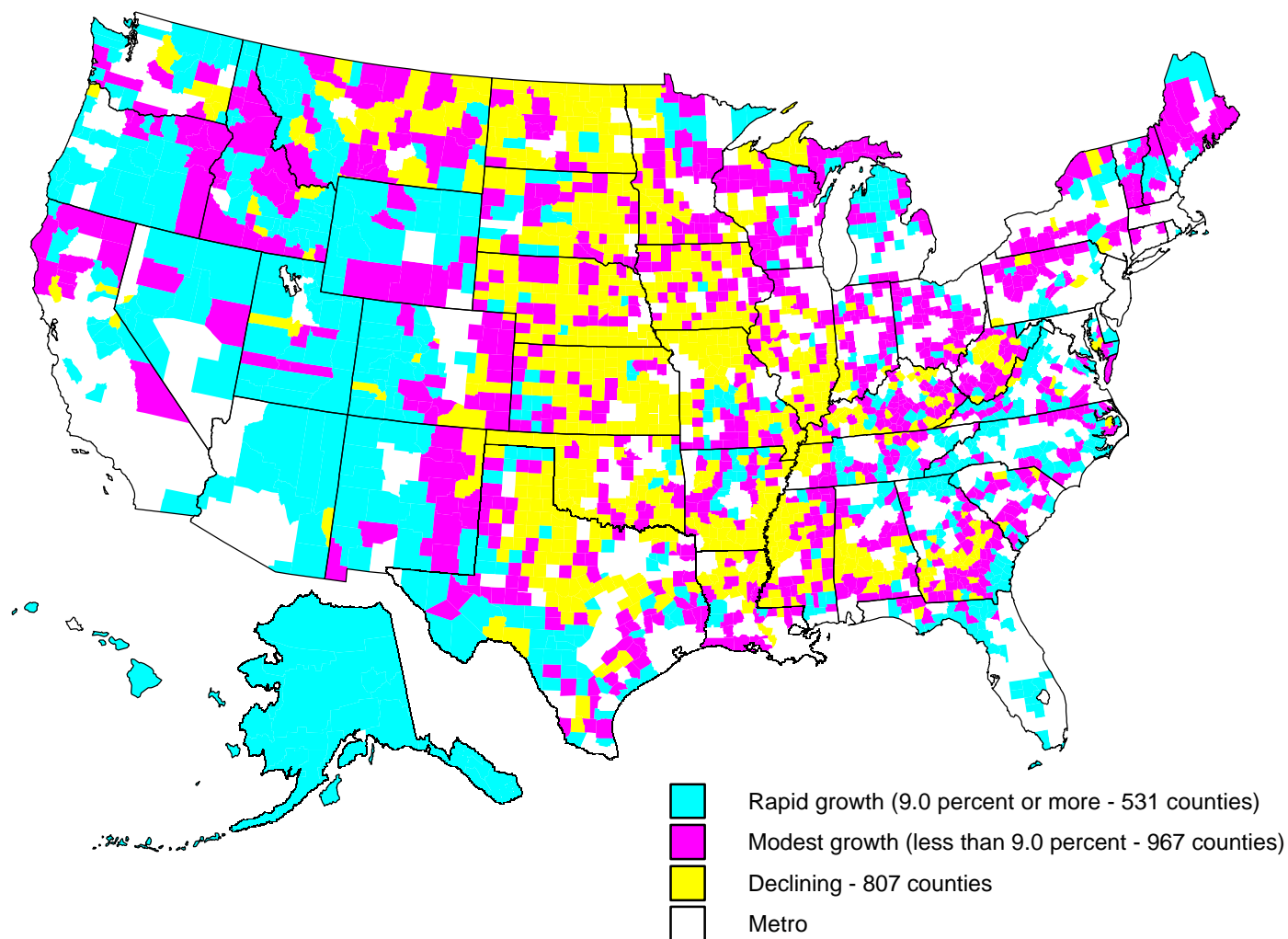
Even though many counties are having more deaths than births through a disproportionately old age structure, this is occurring despite the fact that there are now over 800 counties with declining numbers of people 65 and over (fig. 3). Although the national population 65 and over continued to increase faster than that under 65 from 1990 to 1996 (a growth of 9.0 percent versus 6.3 percent), in nonmetro counties as a whole this was not true. Rather, the nonmetro population under 65 grew somewhat faster than that 65 and over (6.0 percent versus 5.5 percent). This comparison is in sharp contrast to the 1980's when the nonmetro older population had a decade growth of about 15 percent against just 1 percent for the under-65 class. This marked change in trend has meant that despite a rapid increase of older people in the minority of nonmetro counties that we view as significant retirement destinations, the national nonmetro population growth rebound has occurred only among persons under 65.

Fully a third of all nonmetro counties are estimated to have had declining older populations since 1990, more than three times as many as in the 1980's. This trend is believed—like that of natural decrease—to stem heavily from the past depletion during their youth of cohorts now reaching 65, as rural young people moved away to the cities in the 1940's or gave up farming in the 1950's. Thus, the burden of elderly dependency has already started to lessen in many rural areas, both absolutely and proportionately. And this is in advance of the more widespread trend now in place in which people reaching 65 are survivors of the small birth cohorts of the Great Depression era. [Calvin Beale 202-219-0482 (after October 24, 202-694-5416), [cbeale@econ.ag.gov](mailto:cbeale@econ.ag.gov)]

Figure 3

**Nonmetro change in the population age 65 and over, 1990-96**

*Six States' nonmetro areas lost population 65 and over: Illinois, Iowa, Kansas, Nebraska, North Dakota, and Oklahoma*



Note: National average growth of the population 65 and over was 9.0 percent.  
Nonmetro average growth was 5.5 percent; metro average growth was 10.2 percent.  
Source: Prepared by ERS using data from the Bureau of the Census.